Acoustics and case for a fourth

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DALLAS

The 1977-1978 probe by the House Select Committee on Assassinations dropped a bombshell on Dec. 29, 1978.

It announced that its just concluded $5.8 million investigation indicated that President Kennedy was "probably assassinated as the result of a conspiracy."

While the Warren Report stated that there had been two, possibly three shots fired at Mr. Kennedy's motorcade — all from the Texas School Book Depository building — the House committee concluded there was a 95 percent certainty that a fourth shot had been fired from in front of the motorcade.

The committee proudly pointed to a 15-year-old Dallas police Dictabelt which, it claimed, held recorded proof of the activities for several minutes following the Nov. 22, 1963, shooting.

Immediately Dallas police officials charged that the conclusions were based on false assumptions; that the sounds had not come from the Dealey Plaza area, where the president was shot, and that the committee had miscalculated the time on the tape.

The portion of tape scrutinized by the committee experts, charged Dallas Police Capt. James E. Bowles, began a full minute after the shots, so any "impulses" or other noise could not have been shots that killed the president.

According to the House committee, there had been a radio transmitter malfunction on a motorcycle driven by Dallas Police Sgt. John McLain, who that day was riding a few yards behind and to the left of Mr. Kennedy's limousine.

As Sgt. McLain pressed his radio button to check in with the dispatcher seconds before the first shots rang out, committee investigators claimed, it stuck in the open position, allowing a complete recording of the following frantic few minutes.

A first study of the Dictabelt tape — which had been played numerous times in 1963 and 1964 by Capt. Bowles, then a sergeant, as he laboriously prepared a transcript of all radio communications on Nov. 22 for the Warren Commission — was said to hold indications of four shots.

A 50-50 chance, said Dr. James E. Barger, speaking for the acoustics team at Bolt, Beranek & Newman of Cambridge, Mass.

Not satisfied with that answer — and already forced to accept the Warren Report's conclusions on virtually every other important controversial area — the committee sent the Barger results off to a second set of acoustical experts, Queens College Professor Mark Weiss and his assistant, Ernest Aschkenasy, for "refinement."

Thirteen days before the committee was to wind up and accept the staff's preliminary report stating that it had found no evidence of conspiracy, the second set of acoustical experts reported. A week later, on Dec. 29, less than a week before the committee was scheduled to end its work, Messrs. Weiss and Aschkenasy provided the specifics.

"It is our conclusion," said Mr. Weiss at the packed hearing, "that as a result of very careful analysis, it appears that with a probability of 95 percent or better, there was, indeed, a shot fired from the grassy knoll."

He explained that while the actual shots could not be heard on the Dictabelt, the enhanced studies pinpointed all sorts of impulses, echoes and reverberations.

Gary Cornwell, deputy chief counsel, led Mr. Weiss over his methodology:

Mr. Cornwell: "You said you needed to know the source of the sound, the location of the source of the sound, and the location or approximate location of the motorcycle. Do I understand from that that what you are saying is you need to know a general area in which to begin making your calculations?"

Mr. Weiss: "That is correct. That is what I meant. As I said, I assumed that the motorcycle would have been somewhere in the vicinity of microphone 4, for example, which was down on Elm Street in the experiment performed by Dr. Barger."

Mr. Weiss pinpointed within five feet where the shooter had to have been and said the shot was obviously a rifle shot.

"We tried very hard to take into account every possible thing that might affect the accuracy of our predictions," he said.

Later that day the committee called Sgt. McLain. He testified that all he could remember hearing was the voice of Chief of Police Jesse